

THE SPARK GAP

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE MID-STATE AMATEUR RADIO CLUB

VOL. 21, ISSUE 9

SEPTEMBER 2004

HAM RADIO "*ONLY RELIABLE COMMUNICATION*" AT HURRICANE CHARLEY GROUND ZERO

Once again, Amateur Radio has proven its value in an emergency. With conventional telecommunication systems unreliable and power still out after the Category 4 Hurricane Charley blasted across the Florida Peninsula August 13, Amateur Radio has proven to be a communication mainstay.

"The only reliable communication we have here is Amateur Radio," ARRL West Central Florida Section Manager Dave Armbrust, AE4MR, told ARRL earlier this week. He was one of the three dozen ARES volunteers at the Charlotte County command post. "We're out in the field trying to handle so many different things that it's almost overwhelming," he said five days into the activation.

By week's end, the need for additional ARES volunteers in the Hurricane Charley relief and recovery effort had stabilized. Communications and Warning Officer John Fleming, WD4FFX, of the Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) told ARRL that ham radio volunteers already on duty in the five most severely affected counties were holding their own in maintaining necessary emergency communication. But he advised Amateur Radio volunteers to remain at the ready, just in case, and recommended that ARES teams, clubs and individuals work through their ARES Section Emergency Coordinator.

The FDEM says Hurricane Charley caused two dozen deaths and nearly 4000 injuries, and almost a quarter-million residents were still without power at week's end. Other reports indicate that as many as 10,000 homes were badly damaged or destroyed.

The most severely stricken communities are in largely rural areas of western and central Florida made up of smaller towns. Among other storm

relief duties, hams have been part of an effort to check on residents and determine what they need and to "make sure everyone's okay," Armbrust said.

[September 2004](#)

Amateur Radio operators have been handling emergency traffic and assisting the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in setting up HF communication to the state emergency operations center in the capital of Tallahassee. ARES also has provided communication for search-and-rescue teams and supported American Red Cross and The Salvation Army humanitarian relief efforts.

In addition, ARES operators handled outgoing health-and-welfare traffic from storm victims now taking refuge in shelters, provided or supplemented public safety communication and even took on some dispatching duties. Amateur Radio volunteers also deployed to hospitals, some of which have experienced spotty communication. Several VHF and UHF repeaters have been buzzing with emergency traffic all week.

Armbrust emphasized that Hurricane Charley cut a broad swath across Florida, and the devastation was widespread. "This looks like a war zone," he remarked. Hot, humid weather has aggravated the relief effort, especially for emergency medical service personnel who not only are dealing with storm-related health issues but with those resulting from the heat.

ARES teams from Florida Miami-Dade, Martin, St Lucie, Broward, Okeechobee and Palm Beach counties deployed to relieve or assist the amateur operators on duty in the affected communities.

In Sarasota County, Ron Wetjen, WD4AHZ, has been working at the county EOC and assigning volunteers to assist in neighboring Charlotte County, where Armbrust has been holding down the fort.

"We've had offers of help from guys in Montana, Ohio, and New York!" Wetjen said August 19. "We have a couple from Tennessee here now, with two more on the way for the weekend."

The Salvation Army Team Emergency Radio Network (SATERN) on 14.265 MHz spent nearly five days in continuous operation. It's also used Amateur Radio for its logistical communications. The Salvation Army has been providing meals, household necessities and other assistance to residents

displaced by the storm and has been relying on its own Amateur Radio resources. SATERN also has taken on responsibility for health-and-welfare inquiries, both via Amateur Radio and through its Web site <<http://www.saturn.net>>.

In advance of the storm, SKYWARN teams were active the Hurricane Watch Net [September 2004](#)

and WX4NHC at the National Hurricane Center cooperated to gather ground-level weather data and damage reports.

"It seems as if the Amateur Radio world is listening and waiting to help when an event such as this occurs," observed SATERN National Director Pat McPherson, WW9E, "and it's edifying to realize the positive impact of their dedication to the task of helping others."

LOCAL HAM IN FLORIDA TO HELP IN DISASTER RELIEF

David Spoelstra, N9KT left for Florida last week to join the thousands of volunteers in helping residents dealing with the aftermath of "Hurricane Charlie". The hurricane pounded the the state of Florida late in August and "Hurricane Frances" two weeks later added to the already debris redden condition.

Dave's first stop was in Atlanta for training for first aid, search and rescue etc. He could be doing a variety of things for FEMA as well as communications. The assignment will last for two weeks and it is a seven day per week job and the usual work day is sometimes twelve hours plus.

Quoting Dave in his last e-mail he said, " It's like being in the Army around here". We all wish Dave the best and he is sure to have an experience of a life time. He also wrote that he will be keeping in touch with me during his assignment. Dave is a member of the C.E.R.T. in Hamilton County and a member of the Indianapolis Radio Club as well as ARES, RACES and SEMA HAM TEAM.

..... Bob N9SIU

=====

MARC MEETING SEPTEMBER 18th

Special guests will be with us to tell us and show us the destruction, devastation and hurricane relief in the state of Florida. The folks met Hurricane Charlie in person and will be here to tell their story and show pictures. Join us this coming Saturday morning at 0800, Johnson County Law Enforcement EOC (in the basement) for the MARC monthly meeting. See you there and bring a friend !

..... Bob N9SIU

[September 2004](#)

2004-2005 MARC OFFICERS

President

Ernest Clark, KB9SKI

Vice President

Dave Daily, KB9LOT

Secretary

Linda Harshbarger, KC9GCH

Treasurer

Brenda Halder, KC9EBL

At the August MARC meeting those wanting to serve as a club officer was presented to the membership. It was also voted by acclamation to accept the slate of officers as presented at the meeting. A motion was made that the slate of candidates be voted for and accepted as officers for the coming year. All present voted in favor of the slate of candidates presented.

We wish the newly elected officers for the coming year the very best.

September 2004

Hurricane Charley Postscript

The following are experiences, observations and emotions we encountered as my friend, Max Fitzpatrick, and I spent a week in Arcadia, Florida, dealing with damages to our winter homes there.

As we drove 50 miles eastward across FL highway 70 from Bradenton, we saw the gradual increase of damage as we approached where the eye of the hurricane had headed north and had crossed our inbound path. This was over a week after the storm. Both sides of the streets of this small country, citrus and cowtown were piled five feet high or more with debris. We gaped and shook our heads as we observed the tree debris, twisted metal roofs, aluminum linais (porches), and styrofoam panels of insulation. The landfill had been closed by the overload of materials. We were observers trying to fathom the scope and extent of damage and destruction.

Before leaving home, we had had firsthand reports of damage to our property and thus were not terribly surprised upon arriving in front of our respective homes. The metal roof from Max's house was impaled in a large live oak tree several houses away. His original roof was still intact but vents and vent caps along with multiple shingles were missing. Thus he had some water intrusion.

My lanai was inverted and collapsed in my yard between a small key lime and an orange tree. My shed was missing its roof as if someone had used a giant can opener

and popped the lid off the can. Most of the shingles were missing on one side of my roof. Most of the skirting from around my mobile home was missing. (I later found two thirds of it.) Some pieces of siding trim were ripped off. The stone facade was blown under the trailer front and pieces of aluminum, screenwire and foam insulation were everywhere. Debris gathered from around the neighborhood had been deposited in the canal behind the house.

There was no visible damage inside the house and I lived in it the week we were there. There were some electrical complications resulting from the receptacle and wire, mounted on the now departed lanai wall, being ripped away.

Several small river oaks along the canal were twisted, broken and the leaves missing or browned. The giant live oaks in our neighbor's lawn were now about one third their original size and devoid of most of their leaves. A live oak on the other side of the canal behind us was uprooted exposing a root ball twenty feet in diameter. In another RV park, a travel trailer had been lifted and deposited on the other side of the barbed wire fence. The Spanish moss, so abundantly draped from the live oaks, was gone. A neighbor remarked, at hearing a blue jay scolding, that birds had been absent but were slowly returning. As I was cleaning and clearing, a rabbit hopped up, sat on his haunches on the former lanai carpet and watched me work. Later, a frog was found

[September 2004](#)

clinging vertically on the shed door. Geckoes scurried about and sunned themselves routinely.

As an amateur radio trained skywarn observer, I noticed the random hit and miss damage, twisted tree tops. Trees, in proximity to each other, had fallen in opposite directions. Looks like tornado damage we see back in Indiana I thought. Indeed there were three tornados reported in the eye of the storm. The insurance agent employ stated eighteen tornados had touched down in our county alone. Some estimates were higher.

We observers were beginning to become participants as we cleaned and prepared to secure our damaged properties. Good news / bad news came into play. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) was giving away free tarps large enough to cover an entire house and the Army Corps of Engineers would put the tarp on for you...if you can wait a couple weeks for them to work their way down the list to get to you. Same story with even greater waits for contractors to do your repairs. "And, by the way, the price of plywood has doubled since Iraq and there is no cement in town to make concrete," the builder reported. (We saw dozens of new travel trailers southbound on I-65 as we were heading home.)

The nice lady at the insurance agency labeled us the most "mellow" victims she had talked to all week. That changed as we tried to contact one of the hundreds of adjusters who had been brought in from all over the country. My adjuster said he was working in the country with cattle ranchers and citrus grove owners and that it would be at least 2 weeks before he would even get into Arcadia. Frustration. Gotta go back to Indiana in 2 days. "Don't worry, I'll be able to figure it out!"

And I think to myself, "Yes, but I'd sure like to be here to help you do that figuring."

We learned the hard way that the 8 p.m. curfew meant that restaurants closed at 6 p.m. so their employees could be home and off the streets on time.

And then I remember seeing the Desoto Village Mobile Home Park where eighty five percent of the homes were destroyed and 100 percent were damaged. So many lost so much, everything.

Amidst the frustration was a wonderful spirit. Police cars and emergency vehicles bore identity logos from all over south Florida. There were fleets of tree removal vehicles. The same for utility services. They traveled in convoys. A large tent in the Wal-Mart lot checked in and assigned volunteers. FEMA had a staging area at the fairgrounds, (the rodeo arena was demolished.) Different services were headquartered in large areas such as the high school and Agri Center spacious parking lots.

[September 2004](#)

Salvation Army and Red Cross had large relief and feeding operations. MCI had a mobile satellite set up providing free phone calls. One local bank was damaged but had a mobile bank operating from their lot.

So many volunteers had put a strain on the local restaurants. Some were serving as many carry out meals as eat in meals. One pizza chain was carry out only. Often menu items were not in supply. Waitresses whose own homes had been destroyed were cheerfully striving to serve the influx.

A small restaurant, where we had gone for breakfast, was inundated by a group of ten customers, who turned out to be Cuban Americans from Miami. They were with the Florida Crisis Response Team and had come to assist in serving Arcadia's large Mexican population of grove and ranch workers. They were Miami teachers and school employees and were being housed in the Arcadia Methodist Church. Max and I, being retired teachers and principals, had enlightening conversations with these folks.

As darkness fell and the curfew took effect. I exhaustedly watched the Olympics and the political ads on T.V. and thought how incongruous all that was in the midst of the pain and suffering of the world turned upside down out side my door.

We had some time, after dealing with our damage, to step back and observe again. I was near tears as I photographed the impromptu drive thru line of people in vehicles receiving ice and water being dispensed by department of correction inmates. The humidity and heat were both in the 90 plus range.

Three signs or symbols were likewise poignant for me. A sign blocking a downtown street where a brick wall had been deposited by the storm declared, "downtown is closed." A lawn statue of Mary had been decapitated and stood with outstretched arms amidst the rubble in front of a damaged home. One of those recent Christmas signs pleading "Santa Stop HERE" stood in front of a home where the couple were sorting through the debris. I asked the gentleman for permission to take a photo. He said, "Sure, we all have to find something to laugh about!"

..... Bob Doles, WB9AYB